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WASHINGTON STAR (GREEN LINE)  
7 JANUARY 1977

# Intelligence: insiders, outsiders

In a television interview last Sunday, CIA Chief George Bush spoke of the "ferocity" with which "some worrisome signs" of Soviet strategic plans are currently under debate in his shop. That ferocity, he indicated, is novel.

Ferocity may not be an ideal spirit in which to argue over raw intelligence data. Nor is it necessarily the worst. Given that so much of the strategic debate reaches us in a state of arid abstraction, it could be refreshing.

The source of the "ferocity" — assuming that Mr. Bush chose his word carefully — is not far to seek. Last June, on the advice of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, Mr. Bush retained a team of strategic thinkers, headed by Prof. Richard Pipes of Harvard, to look over the shoulders of official intelligence professionals as they drew up the new National Intelligence Estimates.

No one except the participants actually knows the sequel. There are reports, presumably from the "outsiders," that characterize the independent evaluation as a bloody contest — a sort of wrestling and gouging match in which the outsiders "licked" the insiders, with the upshot an unusually bleak estimate of Soviet warmaking capacity.

But notwithstanding its obvious interest in the integrity and accuracy of intelligence estimates, it isn't given to the public to know whether this account is truth or baloney or something between. One must allow that a combination of ego massage and journalistic fancy may figure in the wrestling-mat scenario. The picture of official softies and unofficial hardliners brawling at a felt-topped table in Langley seems improbable.

It would be understandable if the official intelligence community took amiss the intrusion of outside evaluators. That intrusion will be seen by some to insinuate bias or incompetence or both on the inside. And those who have experience of the "ferocity" of scholarly tiffs may well imagine what occurs when disagreement is compounded by intimations of mistrust.

We see no need, in any case, for the public to share this official touchiness. The independent evaluation of intelligence work by outside panels is not unprecedented; and it is neither more gratuitous nor "patently political" than evaluations of, say, Congress or the White House. Considering the stakes at hazard, it may be more important.

Given certain raw and fairly well documented facts — e.g., in this case, the hardening of Soviet missile silos, extensive civilian defense and food storage programs, and a steadily enlarging defense budget — disagreement over their meaning is inescapable. The least outsiders may suppose about intelligence-evaluation is that it carries a large dimension of human judgment and demands compromise on disputed points. Presumably, then, the greater the variety of views brought to the process, the greater the likelihood that final estimates will be sensible and realistic — even at the cost of some procedural "ferocity."

Mr. Bush was distressed that this struggle over the National Intelligence Estimates made its way, piecemeal, into public print. Perhaps indeed it intimates a certain indiscipline in those who talked out of school. But the exposure is a mixed misfortune. Of all government processes, intelligence evaluation is the most secretive, even though the public is often asked to ratify costly decisions based on it. The secrecy can be justified when information would lead to important sources and methods; much of it, however, especially in retrospect, is excessive. In judging the wisdom of Mr. Bush's unusual procedure, it would help to know more about prior successes and failures of intelligence judgment — and we assume there are both. We have in mind no quest for scapegoats by name and person, obviously, but only the raw material for forming some sense of how competent the intelligence apparatus and its methodology are.

There are those who believe, for instance, that it was a significant failure of intelligence not to foresee the great enlargement of Russian civil defense measures following the mutual renunciation of anti-ballistic missile development. Was it or wasn't it? What is the point of keeping the public in the dark?

We ask these questions, not in the expectation of ready answers, but to suggest only this — that when the public has no basis for judging the effectiveness of the intelligence-estimating process it may well settle for next best things, one of which may be "outside expertise" and an adversary estimating process when the estimates are in preparation. It is not a wholly satisfactory substitute; but it is certainly one that comes to public mind, as it did to Mr. Bush's.